

The Weakness of Fear

John 18:15-18, 25-27

Is. 53:7 “He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth.”

Those words describe the most courageous act ever performed by a human being. The courage to endure. The courage to suffer. The courage to be mistreated. And to remain silent. The courage not to fight back, not even to defend himself. And it was that courage that Philip proclaimed to the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8, using the words of Isaiah 53. God used those words to bring salvation to that man.

Acts 8:26 “Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, “Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is desert. 27 So he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasury, and had come to Jerusalem to worship, 28 was returning. And sitting in his chariot, he was reading Isaiah the prophet. 29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go near and overtake this chariot.” 30 So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?” 31 And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him. 32 The place in the Scripture which he read was this: “He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He opened not His mouth. 33 In His humiliation His justice was taken away, And who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth.” 34 So the eunuch answered Philip and said, “I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of

himself or of some other man?” 35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him.”

Philip preached the courage of Jesus. This morning, I am going to preach the opposite. Instead of the courage of Jesus, the fear of Peter. The weakness of Peter. Instead of courage, our focus this morning is the weakness of the complete lack of courage.

That’s actually a helpful focus, because it gives us a warning of great danger. It’s good to study weakness, so that we learn strength by contrast. We can learn about Jesus courage as a contrast to Peter’s cowardly betrayal. So let me start with the most general observation I can from this text,

I. THE WEAKNESS OF FEAR.

Look at how that fear shows itself.

v.15-17

It is, first of all, I believe,

A. Fear of being identified with Jesus.

Perhaps that’s an understandable fear, as association with Jesus might bring trouble, but certainly not excusable. Remember what Peter has learned from Jesus. Remember his experiences. We spent ten weeks, I think it was, focusing on the private and personal final discourse, in John chapters 14-16, followed by Jesus’ prayer. Peter has been with Jesus for three years, seeing the many miracles. Hearing all that he has to teach.

He has heard that Jesus will be leaving, no doubt that meant death. He has received all the encouragements Jesus could give. The Lord’s supper has been instituted. The Holy Spirit is

promised. And prayers have been offered for the disciples specifically.

John 17:6 “I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me out of the world. They were Yours, You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word. 7 Now they have known that all things which You have given Me are from You. 8 For I have given to them the words which You have given Me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came forth from You; and they have believed that You sent Me.”

But still, Peter was caught off guard. He was identified by a servant girl, her status emphasized, I believe, because of how seemingly unimportant she was. This wasn't one of the Roman soldiers. This wasn't one of those who came with the high priest. Just a lowly servant girl.

Interesting interplay with John, too, isn't there? And I believe John is referring to himself, as he frequently does, in the third person.

v.15

John couldn't hide his identity, not that there is any indication he wanted to. He was known to the high priest. And John seems to push the issue, and specifically calls Peter in,

v.16

That is how Peter was pressed to respond. And the initial identification wasn't even that strong, as it is worded well in our English Bibles,

v.17 “You are not also one of this Man's disciples, are you?”

The “no” answer is implied, expected. But even then, Peter couldn't escape the questions without revealing the fullness of his fear. It was probably un-premeditated, just an instinctive reaction,

without much thought. But this is no small matter. Rather, it is a matter of his character. A matter of his heart. It was a cowardly lie, contrary to the very nature of the gospel itself, which is “the power of God unto salvation.” And Peter here seems ashamed of it.

This sort of fear is entirely contrary to what Paul would later write in,

2 Tim 1:6 “Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. 7 For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”

And Jesus' own words were so clear,

John 14:27 “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”

And we could go all the way back to,

Joshua 1:5 “No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you. 6 Be strong and of good courage, for to this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. 7 Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go. 8 This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. 9 Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

This weakness of fear is no small matter. Though this fear of

men is a very common weakness, even among the people of God. It is the fear that moves us to want to be accepted and to find approval, even if that conflicts with doing what is right. It is the fear that causes us to shrink back, even from being identified as a Christian. It is the fear of insecurity, and ultimately, if you live with insecurity, if you live with fear of others, if you live with the objective of winning the approval and praise of men, you will cease to be faithful servants of Christ. That's what Paul writes in,

Galatians 1:10 "For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ."

Now, that doesn't justify rebellion or defiance against the legitimate exercise of spiritual oversight and authority, especially within the church, but it does mean that we are to live for the approval of Christ, not of other men. So don't be self-righteous about Peter's fear of man. I suspect that such fear lurks in every one of us, in one form or another. It comes out as insecurity, or perfectionism, or impulsiveness, or embarrassment, or the fickle uncertainty in one who is blown and tossed by every wave of doctrine and teaching. We like to conform to acceptable standards, don't we? We like to be liked. We like to be accepted. We are often fearful of being different.

And so, in our society, one of the greatest influences upon our lives is what we call peer pressure. From the youngest of schoolchildren, to the most successful of men at the height of their careers, we are often driven by the fear of being found acceptable in the eyes of other people. We like to fit in! And I believe that is the weakness that Peter is showing to us.

Along with,

B. The fear of being caught in a lie.

I made the observation about the first question, from the

servant girl, that it likely caught Peter off guard. Likely his response to her was simply a reaction, an unthinking and immediate response which he hadn't thought about ahead of time.

But you can't assume that the second and then the third time Peter is questioned.

v.25

There the question is more direct, and the answer is even more definitive. With still further emphasis on the third occasion.

v.6-27

Luke's gospel describes the same sequence,

Luke 22:54 Having arrested Him, they led Him and brought Him into the high priest's house. But Peter followed at a distance. 55 Now when they had kindled a fire in the midst of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. 56 And a certain servant girl, seeing him as he sat by the fire, looked intently at him and said, "This man was also with Him." 57 But he denied Him, saying, "Woman, I do not know Him." 58 And after a little while another saw him and said, "You also are of them." But Peter said, "Man, I am not!" 59 Then after about an hour had passed, another confidently affirmed, saying, "Surely this fellow also was with Him, for he is a Galilean." 60 But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are saying!"

Matthew gives us even further explanation in,

Mat. 26:71 "And when he had gone out to the gateway, another girl saw him and said to those who were there, "This fellow also was with Jesus of Nazareth." 72 But again he denied with an oath, "I do not know the Man!" 73 And a little later those who stood by came up and said to Peter, "Surely you also are one of them, for your speech betrays you." 74 Then he began to curse

and swear, saying, “I do not know the Man!”

Peter responds with an oath the second time, according to Matthew. And then the third time, “he began to curse and swear, saying, “I do not know the Man!” Now it is premeditated. Now it is planned. It is intentional. And well thought out.

And among other things, I believe Peter is now having to cover up a lie. If he says “yes,” he knows Jesus, then the untruthfulness of the first response would be made known. And lying does that, doesn’t it? When you lie, you can always assume that you will have to lie again to cover it up! And all you children, that’s a lesson you simply must be willing to learn. And adults, too. Lies are never harmless. And they never remain alone. One lie will most certainly bring about the need for a second lie to cover up. And Peter is caught in that trap.

All because of the weakness of fear. And then, similar to that, we see,

II. THE WEAKNESS OF SELF-PRESERVATION.

And I really could call that an absence of faith. Peter was scared, because he knew that Jesus was going to be put to death. Mark’s gospel fills in more details of what was happening.

Mark 14:53 “And they led Jesus away to the high priest; and with him were assembled all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes. 54 But Peter followed Him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. And he sat with the servants and warmed himself at the fire. 55 Now the chief priests and all the council sought testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, but found none. 56 For many bore false witness against Him, but their testimonies did not agree. 57 Then some rose up and bore false witness against Him, saying, 58 “We heard Him say, ‘I will destroy this temple made with hands, and within three days I will build

another made without hands.’” 59 But not even then did their testimony agree. 60 And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, saying, “Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?” 61 But He kept silent and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked Him, saying to Him, “Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” 62 Jesus said, “I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.” 63 Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “What further need do we have of witnesses? 64 You have heard the blasphemy! What do you think?” And they all condemned Him to be deserving of death. 65 Then some began to spit on Him, and to blindfold Him, and to beat Him, and to say to Him, “Prophecy!” And the officers struck Him with the palms of their hands.”

I believe it is fair to say that there is with Peter, at this point,

A. An unwillingness to endure opposition.

He knew what was going on. Jesus was being put to death. And Peter’s instinctive response was to protect himself from that same opposition.

v.17 “You are not also one of this Man's disciples, are you?” He said, “I am not.”

The ordination vows that I have taken as a minister of the gospel include things you would expect, and require, that I believe the Bible to be the word of God, that I believe the Westminster Confession and Catechisms to define and expound the teaching of the Bible, that I promise to be faithful to the duties of my ministry, etc. But there is one vow, or even just half of a vow, that is often under-emphasized, though it could become the hardest to keep. “Do you promise to be zealous and faithful in maintaining the truths of the gospel and the purity, the peace, and the unity of the church, whatever persecution or opposition may arise unto

you on that account?”

“...whatever persecution or opposition may arise unto you on that account?”

Rev. 2:8 “And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, ‘These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life: 9 “I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.’”

Be faithful until death. Faithful, when tested. Faithful, under tribulation, even unto death! That is a calling for all of us, isn’t it? Not one we think a lot of about, and that is why Peter’s actions can be understandable. It is easy to identify with this unwillingness to endure opposition. Why, we don’t even want to be ridiculed. We don’t even want to be mocked. Or ignored. Insulted. We don’t want to lose popularity, or friendship.

I’m not justifying any of that. It’s all a serious danger that we must avoid, this weakness that makes you unwilling to endure opposition. And like Peter, for us that will often also include,

B. An unwillingness to endure deprivation.

To suffer needs, perhaps just to the point of being uncomfortable.

As Peter stood silently among those guilty conspiracy to put Jesus to death, he was content to warm his hands over the open fire.

v.18

What a horrible distraction for our spiritual well-being, when self-preservation becomes the objective of our lives. Not, “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.” But instead, “Seek first your own survival, and kingdom of God and His righteousness shall be added unto you.” But it doesn’t work that way, for Jesus says,

Mat. 16:24 “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. 25 “For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. 26 “For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”

What profit is it to you if you preserve your own safety and security and comfort, but have to deny the reality of Jesus Christ to do it! What profit is it if you can the approval and praise of other people, but deny the Lord. Oh let me die before I would do such a thing!

Be careful, though, for this cowardly fear resides in all of us. This instinct of self-preservation lurks in the depths of all of our hearts, and ultimately, it must be put to death. Or we will do the very same thing that Peter did. When confronting danger, when confronting anything that produces fear, we would deny Jesus Christ in one way or another. We deny the sovereign authority we he is to exert upon our lives. We live as if he didn’t exist. We speak and act just like those who are unbelievers. Perhaps, with this same fear, this same weakness. We just like to be comfortable.

Peter is a fascinating man to study, isn’t he, because when he felt some measure of being in control, he acted boldly. Seemingly

without fear. Remember, he's the one who had drawn his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. So reckless and thoughtless actions there, but still, underlying that recklessness, was this deep and abiding fear that God makes known so clearly. When by himself, when left without his own sense of natural defenses, he was paralyzed with the weakness of fear, content to stand with those who were in the process of having Jesus arrested and put to death, satisfied to keep himself warm with the heat of that fire.

With disastrous consequences. Let's look at,

III. THE CONSEQUENCES OF WEAKNESS.

The language recorded in the other gospels demonstrates

A. The grief of failure.

Grief. The bitter sense of utter and complete failure.

Mark 14:72 "A second time the rooster crowed. Then Peter called to mind the word that Jesus had said to him, "Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times." And when he thought about it, he wept."

Mat. 26:73 "And a little later those who stood by came up and said to Peter, "Surely you also are one of them, for your speech betrays you." 74 Then he began to curse and swear, saying, "I do not know the Man!" Immediately a rooster crowed. 75 And Peter remembered the word of Jesus who had said to him, "Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." So he went out and wept bitterly."

Luke records that same phrase. "Peter went out and wept bitterly."

The bitterness lay in the inescapable sense of failure. And

there is nothing to hide that failure. There is nothing that will absolve Peter of that guilt. Nothing that will give justification for his cowardice. Nothing that will explain or even mitigate the absolute sense of failure.

That's a very uncomfortable place to be, and one we usually seek to avoid. We like to focus upon extenuating circumstances. Or rationalizations. We often try to minimize our failure. We downplay them. Even excuse them.

There is no room for any of that with Peter. He wept bitterly. And God, of course, doesn't let me off the hook either, so to speak.

Remember what Jesus had said previously to Peter,

John 13:36 "Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, where are You going?" Jesus answered him, "Where I am going you cannot follow Me now, but you shall follow Me afterward." 37 Peter said to Him, "Lord, why can I not follow You now? I will lay down my life for Your sake." 38 Jesus answered him, "Will you lay down your life for My sake? Most assuredly, I say to you, the rooster shall not crow till you have denied Me three times."

God gives Peter a tangible reminder, an audible symbol, of his betrayal. He told Peter, ahead of time, what he would do. And gave him a reminder. The rooster will crow.

v.27 "Peter then denied again; and immediately a rooster crowed."

Peter was left completely exposed before God. Naked, without cover, without excuse. It was,

B. The grief of betrayal.

He was guilty of betraying Jesus. Plain and simple.

Now, I think it is useful for us to think in those terms. Because we often betray Jesus, as well. With our words. With our actions. And with our inactions—things we don't do or say that we should have! We betray Jesus, too, out of the weakness of fear, and the desire to protect ourselves and preserve our comfort. In essence, all of our sin is just such a betrayal.

And I think, sometimes, it would be useful for us to hear a rooster crow in the same way! It would get your attention. So maybe think about your own besetting sins, the sins you struggle with, and continue to struggle with. Maybe it would be good to think of this passage the next time you give in to that sin. Just imagine that you hear a rooster crow three times. And when you hear that, be reminded that, in your sin, you have just betrayed Jesus. It really should be that simple.

And as you weep bitterly, aware of your own act of betrayal, then listen and hear the words of Isaiah the prophet,

Is. 57:15 “For thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: “I dwell in the high and holy place, With him who has a contrite and humble spirit, To revive the spirit of the humble, And to revive the heart of the contrite ones.”

Then you are ready to pray like David prayed in,

Ps. 51:1 “Have mercy upon me, O God, According to Your lovingkindness; According to the multitude of Your tender mercies, Blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, And cleanse me from my sin. 3 For I acknowledge my transgressions, And my sin is always before me. 4 Against You, You only, have I sinned, And done this evil in Your sight— That You may be found just when You speak, And blameless when You judge...7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. 8 Make me hear joy and

gladness, That the bones You have broken may rejoice. 9 Hide Your face from my sins, And blot out all my iniquities. 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me.”